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DEVELOPING CRAFT PEDAGOGY FOR OLDER ADULTS IN CARE SETTINGS

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Abstract

Research has revealed that creative activities such as craft-making offer mental and physical stimulation and enable connection with the wider world. Engagement in making can enhance mood and help to preserve identity as an enabled and developing person. These factors are important for older adults and their well-being, especially for those who need extensive care. Notwithstanding the research findings, the opportunities provided by creative activities are not utilized to their full potential in care settings.

This paper looks at the elements of appropriate craft pedagogy in this context. The pedagogy was created following the practices of action research during an international Handmade Wellbeing project, with partners from Finland, the U.K., Austria, and Estonia. The pedagogical model was co-created iteratively during the project to reach the potential of enhancing well-being with craft activities.

The role of the facilitator of creative activities is crucial. The starting point is to reflect one's perception of older adults and design learning targets that are suitable for them. A good facilitator masters the topic of the activities and knows instructional methods. Knowing how to adapt the content and instructional approaches so they are suitable for participants is essential and requires knowledge of the special needs of the participants, such as dementia and limitations in physical abilities. All along, the facilitator needs to reflect critically on his/her own perceptions, beliefs and experiences to be able to develop and revise his/her practice.

Introduction

In recent years, the relation of the arts to human health and well-being has increasingly attracted attention in research and development projects. Portraying health as mainly a

biological matter has given way to a holistic perception that also recognises the influence of psychological and social factors in health. Accordingly, promoting health and well-being includes fulfilling not only physiological, but also psychological and social needs. (Fancourt, 2017.) This has led to the integration of arts and health, which usually means improving health and healthcare provision by using creative activities and arts-based approaches in different ways (White & Hillary, 2009). In this study, we focus on one category of arts and health, participatory arts programmes. They are usually designed for specific target groups, such as older adults with dementia, to fulfil a special well-being need through participation (Fancourt, 2017).

So far, research about participatory arts programmes in older adult care settings has mainly focused on the impact of the activities, whereas pedagogy that meets the needs of older learners has not received much attention in research (Creech & Hallam, 2015). While it is important to ensure access to creative and educational activities for people in different stages of life, just having these activities does not necessarily make them “good” (Formosa, 2002). The facilitators play a significant role in how beneficial the activities actually are, and they should master pedagogical approaches that enable and support well-being in practice (Creech & Hallam, 2015). Yet, there has been a lack of research on pedagogy in learning for the fourth age (Formosa, 2014). Also, in creative domains such as crafts, educational research mainly focuses on pedagogy that is relevant to school (Kangas, Seitamaa-Hakkarainen, & Hakkarainen, 2013; Pöllänen, 2009a).

The purpose of this study was to explore some core elements of suitable craft pedagogy for older adults in care settings. Specifically, the focus was on textile crafts such as fabric printing and felting. The paper is based on action research carried out during an Erasmus+ (KA2 Adult Education) project ‘Handmade Wellbeing – Collaborative learning in craft and welfare interfaces’ undertaken between 2015 and 2017 (Handmade Wellbeing, 2017). The aim of this international European project was to enhance the professional competence of arts and craft practitioners to conduct craft activities for older adults who need care support, and to develop suitable pedagogy for these activities. The underpinning aim was to enhance the older adults’ well-being through participation.

Several studies have suggested that craft making can positively influence well-being, for example by enabling learning experiences. Craft hobbyists enjoy developing their skills and completing projects, which give them a sense of achievement and self-efficacy (Liddle, Parkinson, & Sibbritt, 2013; Reynolds, 2010; Schofield-Tomschin &

Littrell, 2001). Older adults seem to benefit from activities in which they can experience a sense of control (Rodin, 1986); making crafts and being able to manipulate materials supports the feeling of being in control of your thoughts and body in the work (Pöllänen, 2009b). Cognitively demanding and embodied making also helps to maintain hand and brain function (Carmeli, Patish, & Coleman, 2003; Verghese et al., 2003), but at the same time it provides pleasure, fun and recreation. Multisensory work with different materials invigorates and helps participants to forget their worries, boredom, and even pain and illness. (Liddle et al., 2013; Pöllänen, 2013; Reynolds, 2010).

Making crafts together is also a means of encouraging social participation (Kouhia, 2015; Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011). Older adults especially seem to value the equal and reciprocal relationships that base on shared interests. (Reynolds, 2010.) All in all, participation in crafts and similar activities can help older adults to construct a positive identity as developing persons and valuable members of a society. (Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011; Reynolds, 2010.) Naturally, ‘arts’ in healthcare contexts can cover a wide range of activities in addition to crafts, such as literature, music, dance and painting. It seems positive effects emerge irrespective of the art form (Cohen et al., 2006; Creech, Hallam, McQueen, & Varvarigou, 2013; Fraser, Bungay, & Munn-Giddings, 2014).

This study was based on the principles of action research to develop craft pedagogy for older adults to support their well-being. Studies about teacher knowledge suggest some core elements and prerequisites for good pedagogy in general. These include knowledge of the learners and their learning, mastering the discipline, knowledge about relevant learning and educational goals and content, and knowing about general pedagogy and instructional methods. Pedagogical content knowledge, which means adapting the content and instructional approaches to be suitable for participants, is especially important. This is the core competence required of teachers and educators. (Shulman, 1987.) During the Handmade Wellbeing project, the project partners from Finland, the U.K., Austria, and Estonia conducted craft workshops for older adults in care settings and collaboratively created a pedagogical model for craft activities in care settings. In the following sections, we will introduce the methods of this development process and the pedagogical model.

Methods

The pedagogical model was developed following the practices of action research. It is a method to achieve the desired changes in practice through evaluation and reflection,

which lead to increased understanding and confidence. In our study, the knowledge was constructed through observation, listening, analysing, and questioning, which are essential in action research. (Koshy, 2005.)

Mertler (2018, p. 13) has consolidated the many essential parts of action research, most of them relevant to our research. First, the aim of this study was to improve education by incorporating change through a collaborative approach, which included talking and working with other stakeholders, educators and students. Our study was also participative; the facilitators of the craft workshops were testing and developing their work through critical reflection. It was practical and relevant to all the stakeholders and direct access to research findings was allowed. Action research is conducted in a cyclical process of planning, acting, developing and reflecting, and in what follows, we have described how this was applied in our study.

During the Handmade Wellbeing project, each partner arranged training for arts and craft students and professionals, hereafter referred to as the facilitators, to conduct craft workshops in care centres for older adults and in this way, to develop their professional competence. The workshop participants were older adults who either lived in care homes or at home but attended to undertake senior day care activities. The facilitators arranged the workshops in collaboration with the project workers and the staff of the care homes. Before the workshops started, the older adults were interviewed about their ideas and wishes regarding the workshops. Training also included group activities, which provided an opportunity to share private reflections with peers, project managers, supervisors, and care staff. These activities were documented in learning diaries, and experiences gained from them were utilized in developing the pedagogical model.

The pedagogical model was developed in cycles so that a new version was built upon the previous. During the project, each partner arranged a training week, which included visits to local care facilities to observe the activities undertaken (see Handmade Wellbeing website, 2017c). The observations were guided by an instruction sheet which included aspects about the pedagogical choices made, interaction, facilities etc. The observations were discussed, and the pedagogical model was developed collaboratively in the reflection sessions during each of the four training weeks. This was done through small group reflections, followed by joint discussions. The small group reflections were summarized in written documents and the emerging themes were gathered jointly in a mind map. The working process has been documented in detail on the project website (Handmade Wellbeing, 2017b).

The first draft of the pedagogical model included many detailed ideas about things that would require attention in the pedagogy for older adults. It consisted of the following themes: 1) the relationship between the facilitator and the older adults; 2) getting to know the target group; 3) awareness of the learning target; 4) good practice and examples; 5) infrastructure and economic resources; 6) cultural context and background; 7) professional skills in crafts; and 8) society and how to influence decision makers. Under each of these were more detailed topics.

During the training weeks, the themes were discussed and developed together. In this process, most of the original detailed ideas merged into bigger themes and some of them were left out, since they were no longer considered to be relevant regarding pedagogy. The remaining themes were: 1) being aware of your personal perception of older adults; 2) being aware of your perception of the situation and your own role; 3) being aware of the purpose; 4) structures; 5) planning the workshop; and 6) interaction and communication. These were dealt with as more detailed topics.

All the partners worked on the model between the training weeks, producing more detailed written material under the agreed themes in a shared e-document. This was elaborated until the end of the project and edited into its final form by the project coordinator and the managers in Handmade Wellbeing Handbook (Draxl et.al, 2017).

In what follows, the main results of the pedagogical model are discussed. Since the process was based on the facilitators' reflections, examples of them have been given in citations. Due to the collaborative nature of the process, neither the facilitator's nationality nor their professional status have been specified. These extracts have been taken both from joint reflection sessions during the training weeks, and from the facilitators' learning diaries. The common language of the project was English which was the mother tongue of the U.K. partner only. The workshops and the learning diaries in the other partner countries were arranged in their respective languages. Thus, some of the citations presented in the following are translations from Estonian, Finnish, or German.

Results

During the creation of the pedagogical model, the importance of high-quality pedagogy for older adults was addressed. The underlying thinking was to appreciate and support the lifelong learning and well-being of older adults. Based on the practical experiences of facilitating and observing the workshops in care settings, the purpose was to look for the core elements of this kind of pedagogy.

Reflecting one's perception of older adults

One of the first aspects facilitators brought up in the reflection sessions was the importance of reflecting on one's own perception of older adults. For example, do we perceive them in a deficit-based way, stressing the loss of functional ability, or in an asset-based way as capable persons with a lot of experience and knowledge despite their frailties? Do we perceive them as a homogenous group, or as individuals? These perceptions have a profound influence on the working process, from setting the targets to choosing the methods, and even communication. To design pedagogically-justified activities, it seems pivotal to start from these reflections.

In our times it does not seem to be desirable to be old. Everything we do is geared to keeping us young, pretty and fit. Age confronts us with mortality, physical and mental limitations, with the past, memories, the loss of autonomy, death and loneliness. But age is also a resource. It opens up access to knowledge about lived-in worlds, biographies, wisdom and rich experience, to personalities and people. Even in old age we can encounter the world with curiosity and openness!

This facilitator is reflecting on the natural aspects of ageing that are perceived negatively in a society that admires youth. However, s/he notes that there is another side to ageing: the gained wisdom and experience. Ageing does not mean that one should stop being interested in new things; older adults can be resourceful, capable and willing to learn. A facilitator's stance towards older adults as learners may influence the way they design activities, for example, how challenging the activities they design are, and whether the activities involve learning new things.

The facilitators found it crucial to remember that older adults are not a homogeneous group. Age is just one aspect of a person, and the participants in an activities group come from different social and cultural backgrounds with diverse life experiences, skills, knowledge and abilities. Preconceptions based on our previous experiences of older adults are limited and need to be challenged. Below, the facilitators point out an important thing: getting to know the persons one is working with by being attentive in the moment.

Based on my experience, I would nevertheless say that the most important thing is to know the group and the individuals, and work with them, not the disease; that you don't exclude things in advance, just because you think it wouldn't work with this disease. It might work with these individuals.

At first you couldn't see people, you just saw behaviour and the disease symptoms. When you got used to it and realized that this is normal behaviour for this person, only then did you start to pay attention to what kind of personalities they are like.

It is helpful to be aware of one's preconceptions about older adults in general, but it is always about dealing with individuals. The facilitators questioned whether it is necessary to emphasize age at all when designing activities. As pointed out above, the preconceptions may sometimes lead to unnecessary exclusion of certain activities and topics. However, many facilitators found it reassuring to know something about common conditions related to ageing, for example memory issues. This made it easier to plan activities and also helped them to concentrate on the persons instead of symptoms.

It is also important to reflect on the facilitator's own role. When working in care homes, it is useful to keep in mind that the residents live there, and the facilitator has been invited into their home. The facilitators emphasized their wish to show respect to participants and create an equal atmosphere that enables acknowledging and utilising the experience and knowledge of the older learners.

When reflecting on my position during the workshops, I saw myself as an experienced artist: my aim was to teach some possible techniques, but I gave the older participants all the artistic freedom. I positioned myself and the group as equals – the only difference is that I have more experiences in that particular technique.

The younger facilitators found it especially challenging to think about their role: What would they have to offer to the people who have life experience three times as long as their own? The above excerpt illustrates the attitude most facilitators adopted: being equal but possessing some knowledge that the participants could utilise in their work. It was also a reminder that the facilitator can also learn from the workshop participants, and this way show respect to their existing skills and knowledge. In conclusion, a situation where both the workshop participants and the facilitator learn from each other was found to be desirable.

Setting targets for meaningful activities

Planning the learning activities includes setting the targets. In the process of developing the pedagogical model, the necessity of reflecting on the purpose of the activities was highlighted: why were these activities chosen and what were their desired outcomes. The

targets depend on the workshop participants, and each facilitator and group need to determine them for themselves. In the following, we describe some of the targets that the participants in this study found important and meaningful while working with older adults.

Seeing ageing as not a limitation but as a resource, and supporting self-efficacy, emerged as important, underpinning targets. In the following citation, the facilitator brings out that many older adults primarily thought that they were no longer capable of making crafts because of their age and related decline in functional ability. This phenomenon was common across all four partner countries. S/he also brings out the shared main target set by the facilitators in all countries; that it is important to support older adults in seeing that they are still capable of doing a range of things.

Ageing sometimes causes people to perceive more strongly their deficits than their resources. 'I can't do that', is something we frequently hear. 'No, I can't do that, but perhaps I can do something else', is what we primarily want to let people experience in our work.

Other goals, such as learning new skills or preparing products and artistic pieces were designed to serve the primary targets of engagement and self-efficacy. The facilitators found it especially important to promote learning and to encourage participants to try new things. The process of making may be more important for the learning process than the actual finished product; however, a completed artefact is a motivating target. Consider the following, in which the facilitator reflects on how the artefact is a tangible, visual proof of capability and learning related to increased self-esteem.

Working by hand enables people to rediscover themselves, to prove that they are still capable of accomplishments. With the help of artists, products are created that restore identity and make people proud of their achievements.

The outcome of the craft activities may be a useful product or a “non-useful” artistic work. This needs to be discussed with the participants. Some of them might expect to finish a useful product, since it is a familiar approach to crafts for many of them. However, facilitators often favoured artistic approaches. They found it easier to promote other goals through art work, such as social participation, which was in all partner countries perceived as one of the main targets. Facilitators saw that doing things together invigorated people and encouraged them to discover things for themselves, and, in

addition, allowed them to share ideas with others. Artful making promoted rediscovering playfulness and allowed people to do something new without the pressure of being perfect.

It is not easy for old people to establish relations. They often seem very isolated and have little relationship to one another. Positive emotions help people to overcome their self-isolation. Working creatively in a group is one way of doing just that. People are encouraged by the experience of working and creating a work of art together.

Many older participants stated that gathering together was the most important aspect of the workshops. Working creatively together facilitated companionship in the group, which can be even more meaningful than the actual making.

Choosing appropriate materials and techniques

It is inevitable that some physical and mental changes occur due to ageing, such as sight, hearing and memory issues, and this requires careful consideration of appropriate craft materials and techniques. As discussed in the previous section, the facilitators found it was important to support older adults to realize their resources and creativity. Thus, it was crucial to choose techniques and materials that are easy to handle and do not underline loss of functional ability. Sometimes special equipment or modification of techniques, such as making things bigger or less detailed, were needed to support older adults in their creativity.

Working with techniques like simplification, enlargement and appropriate aids, though, helps people to accomplish certain tasks again.

The facilitators needed to create new ways to use familiar materials and techniques. Often materials, tools and techniques carry with them associations about lived experiences. These could be utilized to make the participants memorize familiar activities. However, it was thought that not choosing the traditional utilisations of certain materials and tools would be a good option for creative work. For example, there is a strong tradition of gender-based craft techniques. These traditions could be encouraged to question.

Choosing unexpected, new materials and techniques was a good way to provoke playfulness, learning and experimentation. Making something that was new for all the

participants also put them on same level. However, topics that are “too strange” may cause the participants to withdraw. Starting with more familiar approaches and encouraging experiment later, and combining familiar and new, were thought to be fruitful methods.

The technique proved to work very well. It was new to them – CDs are familiar objects to us, but strange for them. They knew how to use a needle; however, so it was easy to grab one.

Because of the timeframe of the workshops, the techniques could usually not be very challenging. For example, even for a skilled person it takes a long time to knit something, while fabric printing can be very quick. Many facilitators found that joint projects and collaborative work were nice ways to provide feelings of accomplishment in a short time.

It was amazing to see how their disbelief turned into surprise and admiration when they finally saw the completed wall hanging they had prepared together.

In collaborative work, all the participants could contribute to a bigger piece by making smaller pieces according to their capability and skills. This allowed different modes of participation, but also strengthened the feeling of being part of a group. It was also possible to make bigger and more impressive work, in which everyone could recognise their individual part.

Facilitating creative processes

As was reflected in previous sections, for many workshop participants, making crafts meant making useful products. Creative and artistic approaches to crafts enabled learning new things, but also caused sometimes confusion. Especially when presenting approaches that are new to participants, creating a comfortable atmosphere was seen as being crucial for the workshops to succeed. Creative processes require using your personality and revealing yourself to the others, which may evoke feelings of insecurity and fear. This, in turn, inhibits creativity and learning.

Creative participation requires acceptance. If someone is afraid of failure, they do not work in a participative manner. Being playful, silly and creative requires a great deal of trust in yourself, the group and the facilitator.

The facilitators stated that showing interest in participants' personalities and lives encouraged them and helped to create an atmosphere of trust that supports creativity. Many facilitators arranged circle discussions where everyone had the opportunity to participate and talk about themselves, their memories and ideas. This encouraged communication and supported the formation of the group. Sharing thoughts about the workshop theme also promoted inspiration, design and making.

In the first session of our workshop, our main goal was to create an open and comfortable atmosphere. We encouraged them to share their stories and memories. Those personal stories about the chosen theme (nature) led us into the working process.

As the idea in the workshops was to support creativity and learning, it was important to consider how to demonstrate the techniques in a way that inspires participants. Inspiration was evoked by providing some examples of possible solutions, especially about unfamiliar materials or techniques. Facilitators used images and ready-made examples for this purpose. However, examples might also inhibit imagination and lead to comparisons, which may not be empowering at all. Therefore, it was essential to encourage the participants to experiment with their own approaches and assure them that all solutions are equally good.

They did want to check constantly whether they were doing it right. It may have been a new concept for them that there wasn't a single right answer, that everyone could work in their own style and that all solutions were equally valid.

The opportunity for choice and individual design was a crucial aspect. An abundance of materials from which to choose is important for the individual work and stimulates creativity. However, it was also noticed that choosing and designing often required support from the facilitators. For example, too many options could confuse people living with dementia, and sometimes limiting the number of options was required. Also, as discussed above, the participants were often concerned about whether they were making things "right", and were hesitating in making decisions. Individual design was supported with questions, modelling different options and encouraging feedback.

Some were more certain of their colour selections this time. I showed them last time how they could try out colours in their work. Choosing the colours was also easier because we facilitators helped the planning with questions.

In addition to supporting questions, assistance was sometimes needed. Participating older adults with good health did not need much help in making. Instead, encouragement was often needed, since many of them tended to underestimate themselves. Some participants were in a weaker condition and needed more hands-on help with the making. Sometimes, the facilitator made things for the participants, or with them. This was found to be problematic since the facilitators wished to encourage everyone to make things by themselves. However, making things together can also be rewarding as supporting the feeling of involvement. In conclusion, helping participants to overcome obstacles when necessary was thought to be suitable.

Supporting the well-being of the older adults

The facilitators monitored the effects of the workshops constantly and paid attention to the mood of the older adults and their learning outcomes. Most facilitators did not have previous experience of dementia, and they reflected on the fact that many times, the participants had forgotten what they did in the previous workshop, or even what happened few minutes ago.

At first it seemed that they didn't remember the previous session at all. But that all changed when they resumed the project. They remembered the work! The needles started whizzing, and they started muttering "over-under-over-under" with no prompting.

One lady is very talkative, and she often repeats the same things. When she was holding her project and working on it, her stories gained new elements.

This shows how craft activities can bring up memories and forgotten skills, also other memories than those related to crafts. Facilitators also noticed that some participants became more skilled in new techniques towards the end of the workshops, even though some of them did not remember participating last time.

Many facilitators commented on their observations about the positive impact of craft activities to create joy and a cheerful atmosphere. Often this emerged after they had got started with their activities, being sceptical first about their opportunities.

Their joy was palpable! They were so surprised and delighted by having done something they had never imagined doing.

The consequences of the workshops in creating the feeling of capability and that it was possible to learn new things were also observed. The older adults were encouraged to express themselves creatively and often they enjoyed this approach.

Their development was astounding. And all the ways people can express creativity, even in a very simple technique. Looking at the colour choices and the designs, it's obvious that they have a clear intention behind the project. It generated so much joy and meaning for the project when people could do it through their own approach.

In the study, the focus was on creating the pedagogical model based on the facilitators' reflections. However, the comments of the older adults were also documented and the following examples from different people show some of their positive reactions:

I've never done this. I'm learning a totally new thing! I would not have believed this morning that I'd be doing this today!

It's nice to work on this. It's something new.

We are still good for something! Nothing's lost yet.

All in all, there were signs of the positive impact that the craft workshops had on older adults' well-being. Also, staff members in care homes considered the workshops to be beneficial. For example, they commented on noticeable uplift in mood of some of the participants.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to develop a pedagogical model that could be used in many European countries. The action research process offered a unique insight into the similarities and differences between care settings and approaches to craft activities in the partner countries. Inbuilt perceptions were challenged and reflected on. New ideas acquired from the other partners were also put into practice in the respective countries.

During the study, many aspects of craft pedagogy for older adults were discussed and developed. In this paper, we have presented the main results of this development work. First, reflecting on one's perception of older adults and getting to know them, is a prerequisite for successful pedagogy. Being aware of one's preconceptions about older

adults may prevent reinforcing stereotypes about ageing and help the facilitator to see older adults as individuals. Knowing the target group and their special features helps the facilitator to design approaches that promote their learning in the best possible way.

Setting targets for activities and choosing appropriate craft materials, techniques and methods to facilitate creative processes are important aspects of designing and conducting creative activities. In all these phases, it is important to keep the target group in mind and find solutions that support their needs and well-being. In this study, the facilitators concluded that supporting self-efficacy, playfulness and social participation are the main targets, which can be supported by setting other goals, such as learning and making tangible craft objects. It was important to choose materials and techniques that enable achieving these goals; not too difficult or hard to handle, but not too easy either. The key element in facilitating older adults creative process was encouragement, since it was discovered that the participants easily underestimated themselves. Sometimes hands-on help was needed, too.

Drawing on the action research described in this paper, pedagogy is dependent on the facilitator's professional skills and perspectives. Mastering the topic of the workshop is essential as well as understanding the special features of the learners and knowing appropriate instructional methods. Thus, pedagogical content knowledge, which means adapting the content and instructional approaches and making them suitable for participants, was crucial in this context. (Shulman, 1987.)

The creative activities arranged during this study were meant to support the overall well-being of older adults in care settings. With appropriate methods, it was possible to promote self-efficacy, positive emotions, learning and social participation. There were many signs of these positive impacts on those involved with the project. However, rigorous research on the effects of these craft workshops would have required an approach that was not possible to arrange within the scope of the project.

The study brought together the expertise of four different institutions from different cultural backgrounds in Europe. All the institutions had previous experience in either craft education or working within social and health sector, or in both fields. However, their institutional background varied and their approach to learning and training as well as working with older adults was different. Thus, partners learned from the others' expertise and also shared their special expertise with them.

The participating older adults had the option to participate in craft workshops that were carefully planned. Often, these activities can be viewed as something less valuable,

as pastime activities, that can be arranged by anyone without any serious planning. The project emphasized that creative activities can be highly important for supporting the well-being of the older adults, in cases when these activities are arranged professionally.

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